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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the social nature of reading instruction provides another direction to research and study that both differs from and adds to cognitive research. H. Mehan's theory of social constructivism emphasizes that the development of cognitive processes occurs within the individual through the internalization of interactions between learners and more capable "teachers." This approach demonstrates that ability and intelligence are not static, but are dynamic, collaborated responses to specific interactions. Success or failure in schools, therefore, may be due to cultural matches or mismatches between teachers and students or schools and homes. This explanation is especially salient since so many school "failures" are members of minority, culturally different groups. Changing patterns of failure among minority group children may indicate a need to modify the social and cultural systems at work within classrooms. Children's conceptions, attitudes, and expectations about reading must be studied to discover how they differ from those imparted within the social settings of reading groups, since reading groups tend to emphasize oral reading and subskill tests rather than comprehension of text. The fact that low reading groups are often composed of minority students who have a harder time understanding this emphasis may exemplify cultural mismatch between students and teachers rather then difference in abiltiy. Studying the sources of mismatches may indicate how to alleviate these problems. (Author/FL)

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WHAT IS READING?: A SOCIAL THEORY OF COMPREHENSION INSTRUCTION

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Abstract

Focusing on the social nature of reading instruction provides another direction to research and study that both differs from and adds to the cognitive research. The theory of social constructivism (Mehan, 1981) emphasizes that the development of cognitive processes occurs within the individual through the internalization of interactions between learners and more capable "teachers." This approach demonstrates that "ability" and "intelligence" are not static, as is often assumed, but are dynamic, collaborated responses to specific interactions. Therefore success or failure in schools may be due to cultural matches and mismatches between teachers and students or schools and homes. This explanation is especially salient since so many school "failures" are members of minority, culturally different groups. Changing patterns of failure among minority group children may indicate a need to modify the social and cultural systems at work within classrooms to make them more congruent, understandable, and compatible with those of the students. Children's conceptions, attitudes, and expectations about reading and reading instruction must be studied to see how they differ from those imparted within the social settings of reading groups. Reading groups in general tend to emphasize performance in oral reading or subskill tests rather than comprehension of the printed materials. The fact that low reading groups are often comprised of predominantly minority students who have a harder time understanding this emphasis may exemplify cultural mismatch between students and teachers rather than difference in ability. Studying the sources of mismatches and incongruities, no matter how elusive they are, may indicate how to alleviate these problems.

WHAT IS READING?: A SOCIAL THEORY OF COMPREHENSION INSTRUCTION

Arlene Anang[1]

Research and practice in reading instruction has centered in the past and now, on the many cognitive demands of reading and how they can best be understood and taught to children. Cognitive psychologists and educators doing the research have assumed that learning to read is a process that takes place *inside* the heads of readers. Yet, the learning process occurs within a social milieu. A shift in focus from the interaction between the reader and the print to the interaction between the reader and his/her environment provides the theoretical orientation of this paper and raises issues for further research and practice.

Reading instruction is social because it takes place within a social milieu. The classroom itself is a social system (Bremme & Erickson, 1977) complete with a status hierarchy (Cohen, Note 1), a system of rewards and punishments (Bossert, 1979), and a flow of activities and working relationships that must be established and maintained by the teacher (McDermott, 1977; Florio, 1978; Mehan, 1979). The classroom milieu is also mediated by students through their power to grant or withhold their cooperation and participation (Doyle, Note 2). The social system of the classroom also includes the work that teachers and students do together to construct, maintain, and modify their definitions and conceptions about reading and

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other subjects and about how to approach the learning of those subjects. It is this less conscious, more subtle interactional work that will provide the major focus for this commentary.

Learning to Read as a Social Process

Research supports the social and interactional view of reading instruction in a well-stated but comparatively new theoretical position called social constructivism (Mehan, 1981). The theory states that cognitive and social structures are composed and reside in the interaction between people. This means that cognitive processes such as learning to read, which most often have been treated as private and internal to the student, are now "being moved out of the privacy of one's head and into the interaction" (Mehan, p. 73). This theory emphasizes that knowledge is gained within an interactional and social setting rather than being internally organized.

Piaget said that learning is constructed activity that progresses through stages of assimilation and accommodation regulated by the child's experiences. This view minimizes the importance of adults in the child's learning process and treats both performance and competence as being essentially the same. Vygotsky (1978), Luria (1976) and other Marxist psychologists, on the other hand, see the role of adults and more capable peers as being *primary* in the social and cognitive development of the child and say that the development of cognitive processes occurs within the individual through the internalization of culturally organized, interactional processes. Mehan and his colleagues at the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition have proposed the concept of social constructivism

to modify Piaget, and challenge his isomorphism of competence and performance. Social constructivism closely parallels early Marxist thought. According to Mehan (1981):

> Rather than assuming a general sense of competence, the contextualization approach makes competence content specific; cognitive principles constructed in one domain are not easily transferred across contexts. The corollary of this assumption has important practical consequences for the measure of intelligent behavior in institutionalized settings like schools; instead of inferring the presence or lack of general competence on the basis of performance in one or even several situations, the contextualization approach recommends a more limited inference. People can be expected to perform well (and poorly) in some situations but not all situations. (p. 76)

Social constructivism may significantly broaden researchers' and practicioners' understanding of what occurs during reading instruction. If "both ability and disability can be understood in terms of the social environments in which they occur" and intelligence is "a dynamic, mutually constitutive and reflexive relation between individual and environment" (Mehan, 1981, p. 76), then researchers and practitioners must look beyond the individual student to explain why some students appear to learn faster or better than others. Children's conceptions about reading and its relative usefulness or importance as well as their changing expectations about reading instruction, as modified or socialized in classroom environments, are areas that merit research and study. This approach of looking at the interactional nature of reading instruction may offer new explanations about children's success or failure in school and may point to creative choices in instruction.

Children's Conceptions of Reading: Background

Children's initial conceptions of reading and literacy and some generalized forms of reading instruction begin in the home and in the culture in which children spend their earliest years. Here children initially develop and modify their definitions about the function of literacy and its usefulness as well as their attitudes and motivation to learn to read and write.

Instruction in reading and writing at home, while probably not as direct or deliberate as in school, occurs both indirectly and directly. Children are indirectly exposed to reading instruction by observing adult members of their family and community as they engage in literate activities and by infering the value the adults seem to place on reading and writing. Children are directly exposed to reading instruction when adults make deliberate efforts to call children's attention to the production and/or comprehension of print.

Some educators say that some children receive less exposure to direct and indirect reading instruction at home than others and that, therefore, they begin their formalized schooling with a handicap. Anderson, Teale, and Estrada (1980) state:

> It is generally believed that the home experiences of low income and ethnic "minority" children do not prepare them effectively for becoming literate. The home backgrounds of such children are often cited as a source of their school difficulties in reading and writing. It is assumed that insofar as reading and writing are concerned, a mismatch exists between the home and the school. (p. 65)

These authors have made naturalistic observations of how families and communities define literacy in order to describe its social

organization in the homes and communities of low-income preschoolers. Anderson and colleagues are trying to find the kinds of literacy the particular children develop and if or how this leads to a mismatch between home and school.

Other researchers have also studied language and literacy differences at home and school to discover mismatches and cultural incongruities. Heath (1982) has described language strategies used at home and school of lower income children in an Appalachian community. She described differences in the use of questioning strategies in these two environments and in how children's responses made them *appear* to be incompetent in school. Gallimore and Au (1979) have observed a paradox between low-income Hawaiian children's competence in the homes and yet often incompetent or inappropriate behavior and learning strategies in school. Their goal has been to help the schools become more culturally sensitive to the needs of these children in order to reverse the low achievement trends for these children. Boggs (1972), for example, showed that Hawaiian children have patterns of relating to adults collectively but not individually, causing problems when they are called upon to answer questions in class. Similar studies have been done with other cultural minorities such as the Warm Springs Indians (Philips, 1972), the Odawa Sioux Indians (Erickson & Mohatt, 1982), the Alaskan Athabaskan children (VanNess, Note 3), and urban hispanics (Carrasco, 1981). This and other research has provided useful information and insight about varying speech communities and participation structures among different minority groups and also

implications or strategies for intervention and improvement in the way teachers deal with cultural mismatches between home and school.

Children's Conceptions of Reading as Modified by Schools

Another aspect of studying the interaction between the reader and his or her environment is to look more closely at how children modify their definitions of what reading is, its purpose, and relative value within the interactive environment of the school and the reading group. The literature on social cognition as reviewed by Weinstein (Note 4) shows that children are active interpreters of their classroom reality. They draw inferences about cause and effect and may have different views of the classroom reality than their teachers. Weinstein suggests that researchers can learn a great deal by looking at the world of school through the eyes of students. Some existing literature (Johns, 1972, 1974; Downing & Ollila, 1975) based on interviews with good and poor readers, shows a consistent dichotomy about conceptions of reading. Poor readers say that reading consists of fluent and rapid reading aloud, doing pages in a workbook, or saying words with correct pronunciation. Good readers report that reading is knowing what a story is about and is a way of gaining further information.

There are still, however, more questions than answers. The general question is, "How do students come to see reading and its instruction from the school's and/or teacher's conception, particularly if this conception is never outwardly or clearly stated?" Related to that question, what information do teachers impart about what reading is and how do students make sense of that information? Further, does the relative

congruence between students' conceptions of reading as formulated at home or in their communities and as it is presented in school aid or deter school success in reading? (It can be assumed that greater congruence between students' and teachers' expectations about the value of various approaches to reading instruction will mean more harmonious interaction and greater collaboration between the participants.)

The practical and important question, "What can teachers do in order to achieve greater congruity between students' expectations, attitudes, and conceptions of reading as formulated in the home and those practiced in the schools?" must be asked. Just as many teachers attempt to modify their instructional goals to make them more compatible with their students' academic needs, can they also modify the social/cultural systems at work within the classroom to make them more congruent, understandable, and compatible with those of their students? Can an awareness of incongruity and how it works make teachers more sensitive to various interactional patterns they use and how these may or may not work in their students' best interests. If, for example, students come to school believing that reading is a ticket into adult society and is necessary in order to get along, can teachers modify their present curriculum to focus on the practical aspects of reading? Can teachers directly instruct their students on how and why the specific kinds of skills that appear in the curriculum will help them, for example, to read labels, menus, or directions? Or if students come to school believing that reading is superfluous and largely unnecessary, can teachers instruct students and demonstrate convincingly its functions and potential

usefulness outside of school?

Some research has shown that the answers are yes and no for different students in the same classroom. While the good students are instructed and supported in the conceptions of reading as a useful and sense-making endeavor, poor readers are indirectly and unconsciously instructed that reading is little more than an exercise in decoding. McDermott (1976), Allington (1980), and Collins (Note 5) have shown that students in low reading groups get a quantitively and qualitatively different emphasis in their reading instruction than those in the high reading groups. Typically the students in the low group spend the majority of their time dealing with units of one word or less (decoding and word recognition) while students in the high group spend most of their time dealing with the meaning of the printed materials. This may explain the dichotomous conceptions of reading reported by students in these two groups (Johns, 1972, 1974).

McDermott (1976) and Collins (Note 5) showed that the instructional process between the teacher and the students in high and low reading groups is largely unconscious but collaborative and can only be recognized through a careful microanalysis of kinesic and verbal signals. McDermott found that turn-taking in the high reading group proceeded smoothly, and teacher's questions related to story meaning. In the low reading group, on the other hand, there was a great deal of interruption both from inside and outside the group, and teacher's questions usually related to grapheme-phoneme correspondences. Collins found that students in the high and low reading groups used different kinds of intonation to segment text when reading aloud. These different strategies used by students in the two groups evoked different correction

strategies from the teacher. Students in the low group read in a staccato or word-by-word style to which teachers provided isolated decoding cues. Students in the high group used more appropriate intonational strategies and contours while reading aloud, to which the teacher responded by providing syntactic and semantic cues as well as models of how a sentence should sound. Erickson (Note 6) posited that the rhythm and intonation used in reading aloud is learned through modeling by adults and that when adults read to children, they are basically teaching how rhythm and intonational contours are indicators of the meaning of the text.

Each of these studies has important implications for instruction in reading groups. Since the low reading groups in these studies were most often comprised of black students from working class backgrounds and the high-ranked groups were usually comprised of white, middle-class students, the systematic differences in the reading instruction that the two groups received may not have been related to any real differences in ability as the grouping criteria suggest. Instead, these studies suggest that the differences in performances are related to cultural differences in narrative style and discourse conventions. Collins (Note 5) found, for example, that the good readers applied their knowledge of the spoken language when reading aloud; so it may be assumed that children in this group have some implicit understanding of the relationship between spoken and written language. The differences between good and poor readers may relate to the degree to which homes and communities communicate

to children that reading carries meaning and is purposeful in the same way as is spoken language. The implication for instruction in this case is that *all* students need to be taught explicitly and directly the similarities as well as the differences between spoken and written language.

A second implication for instruction that grows out of these studies is that students should be directly taught, particularly through modeling and discussion, how to use rising and falling tones correctly and expressively when reading aloud, and how to indicate attribution of the speaker. Intonation reflects the meaning of the text and expresses an understanding of the context, the author's message, and the similarities of written and spoken language. Grasp of intonational patterns makes students' reading sound more proficient.

A third implication is that teachers should learn to recognize and be more conscious of the correctional strategies they use. Many such strategies become rather automatic for experienced teachers; they forget about the different correctional strategies they may be using with different groups. Recognizing and monitoring these strategies equalizes teachers' treatment of each group and maximizes the learning possibility for all students through use of the most appropriate correctional strategies uniformly.

Conclusion

Reading instruction as an interactional social process reveals that instruction has been systematically different for students in high and low reading groups who also may be members of different socio-economic and ethnic groups. Differences in instruction rather than differences in intelligence or ability, may explain in part why students in the high reading groups improve at faster rates than students in the low reading groups. Furthermore, while "intelligence" may provide an explanation for differences in achievement, it does not suggest what to do about those differences. Social constructivism, on the other hand, implies that when differences in social environments can be found, no matter how elusive they are, they can be corrected so that classrooms can become more successful learning environments for *all* students.

Secondly, looking at reading instruction as a social process in homes and communities as well as schools may indicate when and where mismatches or incongruence occur. Reading as it occurs in homes and communities almost always tied to a specific function (following recipes, getting information, for pleasure). No matter what the function or purpose is, the primary objective is to understand the written text and to get as much meaning out of it as possible. Yet reading instruction in schools often loses sight of the importance of comprehension in an attempt to concentrate on the subskills of reading. It often appears that students become socialized into believing that reading is done for its own sake, or that reading is a series of unrelated skills

and that the most important criterion is *performance*. If researchers adopt a constructivist theory and use the microanalytic methodologies implied by it to understanding *when and how* different conceptions of the task of reading are being formed by children and where the sources of mismatch and incongruity lie, it may be possible to alleviate the problem through changes in curriculum and practices of instruction.

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